

# The Oregonian

## Stepping up on Mount Hood

**Two Oregon congressmen present a smart, bipartisan plan to expand wilderness and settle conflicts on the mountain**

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Like mountain climbing, politics is about choosing where to set your feet. On Tuesday, Congressmen Greg Walden and Earl Blumenauer announced their biggest step yet on Mount Hood.

The two are prepared to introduce a bill to add 77,500 acres of Mount Hood wilderness, give wild and scenic river protections to 23 miles of streams and set in motion a land exchange to end a 30-year dispute over commercial development on the mountain's east flank.

Walden, a Hood River Republican, and Blumenauer, a Portland Democrat, have walked and talked Mount Hood for three years. Some will now argue the two congressmen who represent each side of Mount Hood should have gone further in their legislation. But anyone who wants to pick up the heavy political backpacks the two have carried is welcome to them.

Walden and Blumenauer have gone the distance. They have trekked around the base of Mount Hood and talked, talked, talked to the many people and groups that care deeply about the mountain and its surroundings. The bill they have produced is not end-all, be-all legislation for Mount Hood. But it also preserves the traditional gathering rights of the Warm Springs tribes. It sets up a Recreation Advisory Committee to referee the recreation disputes inevitable in a natural area with 1.5 million urban neighbors.

Should they have gone further? Well, yes, there are other beautiful areas on Mount Hood fully deserving of wilderness protections, including old-growth forests around Boulder Lake, Memaloose Lake and Fifteenmile Creek.

But these two congressmen, with their vastly different politics and worldviews, have produced a bill that should move quickly through a House of Representatives that over the past three years has approved only five new wilderness bills for the entire nation.

Walden and Blumenauer went as far as they could. One more step in any direction and they would have split up. That's the modern history of the wilderness debate in Oregon. People push, push, push until a broad consensus is all but impossible. So it has been 21 years since any wilderness has been added to Mount Hood, even though this beautiful natural place that sits so close to urban Oregon demands more protections.

Sen. Ron Wyden has called for up to 200,000 acres of new wilderness on Mount Hood. Someday Congress may well be prepared to take that kind of bold step to protect more of the lands around the base of Mount Hood and along the ramparts of the Columbia Gorge. But it won't happen this year.

Some conservation groups are now urging Wyden to join with Sen. Gordon Smith to introduce a Mount Hood bill in the Senate that would expand on the wilderness areas in the Walden-Blumenauer bill. That would be our preference, too.

Yet the time has come for anyone with a bigger, better idea on Mount Hood to step up and shoulder the political burden. It's easy to throw around big wilderness numbers -- 150,000 acres, 200,000 acres, 230,000 acres -- but it's something else to write a serious proposal that can pass Congress.

Walden and Blumenauer have done the heavy lifting. They have literally carried their proposal around the mountain, to every community and interest group, and have now laid it before Congress. No one has ever taken more sure-footed steps on Mount Hood.